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**Trans embodiment in carceral space: hypermasculinity and the U.S.  
prison industrial complex**

Rae Rosenberg and Natalie Oswin\*

Rae Rosenberg

Department of Geography, McGill University

805 Sherbrooke St West

Montreal, QC

H3A 2K6

Email: rae.d.rosenberg@gmail.com

Natalie Oswin\*

Department of Geography, McGill University

805 Sherbrooke St West

Montreal, QC

H3A 2K6

Email: natalie.oswin@mcgill.ca

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## **Trans embodiment in carceral space: hypermasculinity and the U.S. prison industrial complex**

Queer geographers have recently begun to examine the lives of transgender persons, a heretofore gap in the literature. This article examines the experiences of incarcerated trans persons in the United States, thus extending this nascent trans geography work by considering a new population in a new space. As some scholarly and activist research has shown over the last decade or so, U.S. trans persons are incarcerated at a disproportionately high rate and face harsh conditions while imprisoned. First-hand accounts of trans prisoners' experiences are however limited due to the difficulty of accessing this population for research purposes. Working in cooperation with a Montreal-based organization that facilitates pen-pal communications between queer persons inside and outside penitentiaries in the U.S., we conducted qualitative research with twenty-three trans feminine individuals confined in facilities in several states. Our findings unfortunately corroborate the findings laid out in the small existing literature on trans prisoner issues, demonstrating that they endure harsh conditions of confinement. We detail these conditions here, while also pointing to informant responses that offer insight into the ways in which trans incarcerated persons cope with the hypermasculine and heteronormative environment of the U.S. prison. These results are offered in the spirit of advancing a queer abolitionist politics that centers the knowledge and experiences of trans incarcerated persons.

**Keywords:** transgender, trans geography, queer theory, incarceration, critical prison studies

Trans people are told by the law, state agencies, private discriminators, and our families that we are impossible people who cannot exist, cannot be seen, cannot be classified, and cannot fit anywhere.

Dean Spade (2011, 41)

The field of queer studies, as developed both within and beyond the discipline of geography, has expanded exponentially within the last few decades alongside the growth of gay and lesbian activist movements. But scholars and activists concerned with transgender issues have frequently bemoaned the inadequate attention that trans lives have been afforded within the spheres of both queer politics and scholarship, and significant efforts to redress this gap have recently been made. This article contributes to these efforts by extending the nascent field of trans geography through a consideration of the lives of incarcerated trans persons in the United States. As some scholarly and activist research has shown over the last decade or so, U.S. trans persons are incarcerated at a disproportionately high rate and face harsh conditions while imprisoned. First-hand accounts of trans prisoners' experiences are however limited due to the difficulty of accessing this population for research purposes. Working in cooperation with a Montreal-based organization that facilitates pen-pal communications between queer persons inside and outside penitentiaries in the U.S., we undertook qualitative research with trans prisoners in order to give them an opportunity to speak about their experiences of incarceration and thus to add to knowledge of their lives. Our request for participation in the study yielded responses from twenty-three trans feminine individuals confined in institutions in several U.S. states. Our findings unfortunately corroborate the findings laid out in the small existing literature on trans prisoners, demonstrating that they endure unduly harsh conditions of confinement.

We detail these conditions here, while also pointing to informant responses that offer insight into the ways in which trans incarcerated persons cope with the hypermasculine and heteronormative environment of the U.S. prison. These results are

offered in the spirit of bringing trans geographical work into conversation with broader critical geographical scholarship, particularly in this case with work that pushes forward critical prison studies through feminist spatial analysis, and of advancing a queer abolitionist politics that centers the knowledge and experiences of trans incarcerated persons.

### **Expanding trans geographies**

Queer geography is by now a robust field of study that examines the relationship between sexuality and space across a wide range of sites and topics. But within this body of work, trans lives are a significant omission. Queer geography's preoccupation with interrogating and denaturalizing hegemonic heterosexualities has prioritized interrogation of the policing of the heterosexual-homosexual binary. This is no doubt an important project, but it has focused attention on the regulation and performance of 'gay' and 'straight' subjectivities to an unintentionally limiting effect (see Oswin 2008). As Catherine Nash (2010, 580) argues, the geographies of sexualities literature 'generally assumes a constructed but largely essentialized and stable gay (and lesbian) subject, defined largely through straightforward assumptions about gender, embodiment and 'same-sex' object choice'. She further points out that 'in much queer geographical research, questions of gender usually only surface in work focused on the distinctions in gay male and lesbian experiences in urban space' (Nash 2010, 581-2) as 'scholars tend to portray queer geographies as centrally concerned with sexuality'.

To address this troubling gap, a bit of work on trans geographies has recently emerged, including most notably a theme section of this journal edited by Kath Browne, Catherine Nash and Sally Hines (2010 themed issue 17 (5)). In the introduction to the

section, the guest editors challenge geographers to reconsider their understanding of gender and sexuality insofar as it relies on a male/female binary. Further, they highlight their intentional choice to pull together empirically based articles on various aspects of trans lives in specific contexts (the U.K., the U.S. and Canada) since ‘trans voices need to be heard and new knowledges created from the specific understandings gained through lived experiences’ (Browne, Nash, and Hines 2010, 574). With this assertion, Browne et al. (2010) explicitly build on trans studies outside geography, a field that has likewise emerged as a corrective, in this case to the failure of the body of interdisciplinary queer studies work to adequately understand and account for trans lives. The nascent trans geography literature endorses the broader trans studies literature’s critique of the dominant treatment of trans lives as abstractions. Though queer theory, with its emphasis on the performance and deconstruction of sex and gender norms, has been vital to the emergence of trans studies, many have been critical of its take on trans embodiment. In short, a theoretical emphasis on the potential fluidity and liminality of trans existence has generally ignored and devalued actual lives and material concerns of trans people. The failure to delve into the realities of individual trans lives and political movements has led to the problematic neglect of the urgent issue of discrimination and violence against trans people in many contexts (see Namaste 2000; Stryker 2006).

To date, work on trans geographies offers consideration of gender disidentification in bathroom spaces (Browne 2004), an autoethnographic account of the ‘tyranny of gender’ across public and private spaces (Doan 2010), examinations of the navigation of gendered identity through participation in a trans youth art project (Rooke 2010) and in workplace and community spaces (Hines 2010), and a few treatments of the

exclusion of trans issues from gay and lesbian urban communities and spaces (Browne and Lim 2010; Doan 2007; Nash 2010). This work has begun the important project of bringing trans subjects into view and going beyond the male/female binary within feminist and queer geographies. This article expands the scope of the existing literature by examining trans subjectivities in carceral space, and extends the conversation between trans geography and the broader interdisciplinary field of trans studies by building on the small but significant literature on trans incarcerated persons in the U.S. In the remainder of this section, we draw on much of this existing work to detail why this particular population of trans persons requires urgent attention from scholars and activists.

The most compelling reason why queer scholars and prison advocacy organizations have recently begun to examine the incarceration of transgender and gender non-conforming persons in the U.S. in earnest is because, as Dean Spade (2008b, 6) powerfully states, the prison industrial complex is ‘probably the most significant perpetrator of violence against trans people’. The prison industrial complex (PIC) was aggressively expanded in the late 1960s/early 70s in response to increased activism and revolution against the state (Dillon 2011; Gilmore 2007; Mauer and King 2007). Many scholars have explored the role of prisons as containment centers for people of color, people living in poverty, sex workers, immigrants, and others who do not support the desires of a white hetero-patriarchal state (see Agathangelou et al. 2008; Davis 2003; Gilmore 2007; Hubbard 2004; Rodriguez 2006; Sanchez 2004; Shabazz 2009; Sudbury 2002, 2005; Wacquant 2001). Others point to the heightened surveillance, policing, and criminalization of marginalized communities to explain the overrepresentation of predominantly poverty and communities of color in prison (Brewer and Heitzeg 2008).

While scholars have deservedly attended to the ways in which carceral institutions uphold white supremacy, capitalism, and state power over people of color (Davis, 2003; Gilmore 2002, 2007; Rodriguez 2006; Shabazz 2009; Sudbury 2002, 2005). Vitulli (2013, 112) argues that ‘the US prison system is also built on and produces systems of gender normativity and heteropatriarchy ... [and] critical prison studies must, therefore, centrally engage with questions of gender and sexuality and do so intersectionally with its analyses of race and white supremacy’. As a system that disproportionately affects people of color and low-income populations, we must also examine gender and sexuality within prison spaces and the ways in which the prison industrial complex impacts other marginalized communities.

Broadly, carceral geographies explore social dynamics within prisons, the co-constituted relationships between prisons and the outside world, and concepts of embodiment in carceral space (see Crewe, Warr, Bennett and Smith 2013; Martin and Mitchelson 2008; Moran 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Moran, Gill and Conlon 2013; Mountz 2013; Mountz, Coddington, Catania and Loyd 2012; Sibley and Van Hoven 2009; Wahidin 2002; Wahidin and Tate 2005). Within these explorations, some scholars have focused their analyses to include gender normativity, heteronormativity, and patriarchy in prisons. At the center of these arguments is the role that prisons play in regulating gender performance, as well as how the enforcement of gender roles influences prisoners’ gender performativity and behavior. Importantly, analyses have explored both carceral femininity and masculinity and the implications of enforcing gender normativity in carceral space. Work on carceral femininity has theorized the role that prisons play in enforcing docility and attempting to ‘feminize’ the behaviors and identities of female



prisoners (Dirsuweit 1999; Moran, Pallot, and Piacentini 2009). As Dirsuweit (1999, 73) writes: ‘The main mechanisms of control are direct and indirect surveillance, work and the alienation of the body from the self. Through this alienation, the prison breaks down the identity of the criminal and maps out a suitably feminised and law abiding identity’. Shabazz (2009) and Tarzwell (2006) also explore the ways in which hypermasculine and racial logics circulate within men’s prison spaces, establishing social hierarchies based on exaggerated performances of masculinity.

For individuals of any gender, carceral geographies reaffirm feminist geographical arguments that institutional power ‘rests on the performative authority with which it can define, repeatedly, certain places and people in particular ways’ (Gregson and Rose 2000, 439). Extending across a variety of identifiers such as race, gender, and class, carceral geographies lend a means to execute feminist geographical practices by exploring intersectional manifestations of disenfranchised peoples (Valentine 2008), as well as ‘bring[s] feminist theorizations of embodiment into dialogue’ (Moran 2013, 2) with a rich selection of other fields. One of the key aspects of feminist geography, embodiment, has become a critical component to carceral geographies, as it is to our examination of trans subjectivities in prison (see Johnson 2008; Longhurst 1995, 2005).

While the exact number of trans people in U.S. prisons is difficult to assess, scholars and activists concur that this population is definitely over-represented (see Hagner 2010; Maruri 2011; Peek 2004; Spade 2011; Stanley and Smith 2011; Sylvia Rivera Law Project 2007). Trans persons are at risk of high incarceration rates for numerous reasons. As Spade (2011, 12) notes, they face a ‘set of barriers – both from bias and from the web of inconsistent administrative rules governing gender – that

produce significant vulnerability'. Employment and educational discrimination along with family rejection lead to high rates of poverty and homelessness for trans persons, conditions that are exacerbated by transphobic exclusions encountered when attempting to access social services, healthcare, public housing, and other government benefits. To quote Spade (2011, 147) again, 'people who have gender markers on records and ID that do not match their identity face major obstacles in accessing public bathrooms, drug treatment programs, homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, foster care group homes, and hospitals'. Pushed to the margins of the formal economy and unable to access social services due to biases as well as to the erosion of social safety nets over the last several decades of neoliberal restructuring, 'with few options, many low-income and poor transgender people engage in criminalized means of making a living, such as sex work' (Sylvia Rivera Law Project 2007, 11). Further, trans persons are especially vulnerable to police profiling given their non-conformity to heteronormative visual cues and they spend time in jail following arrests for entering the 'wrong' bathroom or for failing to produce 'proper' identity documents, and get arrested for 'quality-of-life' crimes such as sleeping in public (Peek 2004). Due to all of these factors, trans persons have been swept into prisons in high numbers while U.S. incarceration rates have soared (indeed its rate of imprisonment has grown to surpass that of any other country) as a result of, for instance, the 'war on drugs' and crackdowns on undocumented migrants. So in sum, as the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (2007, 11) notes 'the increasing imprisonment of low-income people, people of color, and women has occurred in conjunction with the disproportionate arrest and imprisonment of transgender and gender non-conforming

people, and has led to a particularly high risk of imprisonment for people who live at the intersections of more than one of these experiences’.

Once incarcerated, trans people face extremely difficult circumstances. In one of the first published scholarly pieces on trans experiences of incarceration in the U.S., Darren Rosenblum (1999, 502) asserts, ‘corrections authorities, through indifference or incompetence, foster a shockingly inhumane daily existence for transgendered prisoners’. Since then, several other scholars and activist researchers have found the situation to be largely unchanged. For instance: in 2004 Peek states that, ‘prison merely exacerbates the prejudice transgender persons already face’ (1218); the Sylvia Rivera Law Project titled its 2007 report ‘it’s war in here’ given the rampant stories of assault, harassment and denial of medical care that their respondents in New York state recounted; and as recently as 2011 Spade notes that, ‘trans people in prisons face severe harassment, medical neglect, and violence in both men’s and women’s facilities’ (89). Despite these facts, very few states have enacted policy statements on the treatment of trans people in penal institutions, and lack of compliance is an issue even in those states that have done so (see Hagner 2010). Additionally, many U.S. prisons are privatized, making it difficult to standardize and enforce policies regarding transgender prisoners (Rosenblum 1999; Spade 2008a; Sylvia Rivera Law Project 2007).

For these reasons – enhanced likelihood of incarceration and abusive treatment while inside U.S. penal institutions – issues surrounding trans incarceration are in urgent need of attention. As Eric Stanley (2011, 3), one of the editors of the important volume *Captive Genders* – the most extensive treatment of trans incarceration issues to date – states, the small existing body of activist and academic research shows that the legal

system ‘works to deaden trans and queer lives’. As such, he further asserts that, ‘the prison must emerge as one of the major sites of trans/queer scholarship and political organizing’, and that this scholarship and organizing ought to proceed ‘in a way that centers the experiences of those most directly impacted’ (ibid, 4). Spade (2011, 221) concurs, stating that there is a continuing need to ‘expose the violences of imprisonment that often remain hidden when their targets are isolated from contact with the outside’.

Taking up this call, we conducted research with trans prisoners in several U.S. states between June and September 2012. In the following two sections we provide details of the study and its results, first outlining the methodological approach taken and then describing the demographics of the participants and providing an overview of the findings. In the latter section, we first focus on our participants’ general experiences of incarceration, pointing to the striking overlap between our participants’ deeply troubling stories of abuse and harassment and the findings of the other activist and scholarly studies conducted over the last decade or so. Lastly, we conclude with a discussion of the coping mechanisms that our participants laid out, to highlight instances of trans prisoner agency, however constrained.

### **The study**

To gather data that details the intricate deployments of gender norms and power relations in carceral space, the qualitative research methods of questionnaires and arts-based inquiry were utilized. These methods facilitated the gathering of both broad-based and in-depth, subjective accounts of trans feminine prisoners’ experiences of incarceration. However, due to the highly monitored nature of prisons and the inaccessibility of

prisoners to researchers, there were several challenges in obtaining the data, particularly regarding ethics and research design.

The primary sampling method was strategic sampling enabled by the cooperation of the Prisoner Correspondence Project, a Montreal-based initiative that coordinates pen pal correspondence between LGBTQ people on the inside with LGBTQ people on the outside. Using their membership database, it was possible to compile a list of potential research participants and their mailing addresses. Snowball sampling also aided in the process of obtaining participants, as individuals who were selected for the research either mailed copies of the questionnaire to other incarcerated transgender women, or talked to friends and sent back names and addresses. Between these two sampling techniques, the total number of research participants amounted to twenty-three. While it was initially hoped that it would be possible to work with a broader spectrum of transgender, transsexual, and gender non-conforming people in U.S. prisons, no incarcerated trans masculine individuals were involved in the Prisoner Correspondence Project at the time of the research. Consequently, the focus of the study was limited to incarcerated trans feminine individuals. All research participants were incarcerated in men's correctional facilities, including state prisons, pre-transitional centers, state correctional institutions, federal correctional complexes, county jails, and U.S. penitentiaries.<sup>1</sup>

We utilized in-depth questionnaires as our main methodological tool for several reasons. Due to the high cost and time of conducting in-person or phone interviews with prisoners, and the legal barriers to entering prisons and working with prisoners, mailings can be a viable methodological option when conducting research with incarcerated populations (Moran, Pallot, and Piacentini 2009). As well, this method mitigates ethical

concerns, such as those surrounding the potential of falsely or non-consensually identifying a prisoner as transgender. While phone interviews were a possible methodological tool, they were not preferable because of their time limitation (approximately fifteen minutes), and also because they cost prisoners money and are heavily monitored by prison administrators. Engaging in either phone or in-person interviews could risk participants' comfort and safety, and could also undermine the data because prisoners might not feel comfortable sharing personal information and experiences in front of correctional staff. Mailing a questionnaire, on the other hand, provides participants with more privacy, time to think about the questions, and space to engage in self-care while revealing traumatic histories and experiences (Meth 2003, 201). Mailing questionnaires also mitigated the risks of inciting administrative retaliation and policing of interview data, although the possibility that mail could be intercepted was unavoidable.

The aim of the questionnaire was to obtain in-depth and detailed accounts of various aspects of incarcerated transgender lives in prison. Questions were grouped in themes including gender, housing, gender expression, transitioning, harassment and violence, locations in correctional facilities, relationships and community, and struggle and resilience. Some of these themes proved to be inconclusive, notably the section regarding 'locations in correctional facilities', because the questions appeared to be irrelevant and/or confusing to research participants. It is possible that being able to interview participants in person or over the phone could have been more helpful for the themes that gathered few responses.

Using questionnaires as the main methodological approach could have also presented a sample bias and other limitations. Because the individuals who were invited to participate had already reached out to the Prisoner Correspondence Project, the research methods excluded prisoners who were illiterate or had difficulty writing. It could also be argued that contacting members of an organization would bias the sample towards those who were already in need of support and would thus be more inclined to participate in the study, whereas conducting interviews could potentially access a population of trans people who experienced less mistreatment and were less inclined to reach out for support. As well, it is more challenging to clarify responses and research questions, and to follow up on participants' responses once their questionnaires have been completed.

While these limitations of using in-depth questionnaires as a methodological tool are certainly significant, this method was, as noted above, the best available option. Many participants responded to the questionnaire stating that they felt excited and empowered by the opportunity to have their voices heard. As Meth (2003, 196) writes, the use of this type of writing as a qualitative research method has the potential to empower otherwise silenced participants by giving them an opportunity to share their experiences. Expressions of thanks and gratitude from our participants for having the opportunity to vocalize their stories indicates that this type of research method does, in fact, 'offer the opportunity for respondents to define the boundaries of their shared knowledge' (Meth 2003, 196) and provide space for empowerment.

The method of arts-based inquiry was also utilized to further deepen our qualitative data gathered. Use of this approach enabled an increased accessibility to highly emotional information, and worked as a form of triangulation in our methods

(Young and Barrett 2001). As a method of qualitative research, arts-based inquiry applies the use of various art forms as a means of gathering data. This method has been explored largely through feminist and queer approaches to research in order to question ‘implications of the *gaze* as a distanciated mode of establishing authority over space and its occupants’ (Johnston et al. 2000, 38, original emphasis). Furthermore, as Feldman (2004, 387) states, using art as an alternate form of research inquiry can enhance the ‘evocative potential of research and [increase] the probability that multiple perspectives and insights will result’ (see also Bochner and Ellis 2003). For these reasons, participants were asked to submit poetry or art that they felt related to the research questions with the hope that it would add a more personal, reflective, and emotional response alongside their written answers. We additionally recognized that participants might not wish to express certain information in written form, as the questionnaire covered sensitive and often traumatic topics. Thus, arts-based inquiry was then utilized as a harm reductive and also therapeutic tool to access sensitive information. It should however be noted that few of the participants chose to provide art-work, and that such material is thus sparingly drawn upon in what follows.

### **Confinement and trans embodiment**

In terms of the demographics of the research participants, twelve identified as transgender, eight as transsexual, six as women, and five as genderqueer.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the research participants stated that they identified as trans from a very early age, mostly from their early youth or mid-teens. While most participants identified as trans prior to incarceration, they reported varying degrees of out-ness in prison – i.e. some were out as trans to everyone, others were only out to a select few, and others were not



out at all. Just over half of participants were thirty-five to fifty years old, with the remainder in a range from nineteen to thirty-four. Ten participants noted a White/European racial/ethnic identity, four identified as American Indian, four as Black/African American, four as bi- or multi-racial, and one as Latin(a)/Hispanic. The majority of participants were in prisons in California, followed by Texas and Florida. Individual responses were also received from Colorado, Missouri, Georgia, and New Mexico.

As noted above, few scholarly and activist enquiries have been made into the experiences of trans female incarcerated persons, in the U.S. or elsewhere. But the research that does exist details their endurance of generally difficult and too often downright horrific conditions. The responses of our twenty-three study participants unfortunately consolidate these findings. At the time of the questionnaire, many of the research participants were housed in administrative segregation, also known as ‘ad-seg’/‘the hole’ or solitary confinement. Twenty-two participants reported that they had been placed there at some point during their incarceration, for time periods ranging from fourteen days to indefinitely, and often multiple times. On average, the length of placement in solitary for participants was 1.8 years per placement. Many participants stated that they had been moved to solitary as a form of punishment by prison administration, as well as for safety concerns (although most research participants indicated that they were still within harm’s reach while in solitary). During their time in administrative segregation, nineteen participants reported being laughed at/called names, fourteen reported being denied access to medical treatment and hormones,<sup>3</sup> thirteen reported being physically hurt on purpose, and eleven reported being groped/felt up. This

reflects the broader arguments that have been made by trans prison literature on the disproportionate use of ad-seg with transgender inmates and the many problems of its use as disciplinary punishment, often by prison staff for disobeying gender regulations (Hagner 2010; Hearts on a Wire 2011; Sylvia Rivera Law Project 2007).

The experiences reported by those in ad-seg were very similar to those reported by participants in general population. Of the twenty-three participants in the study, all reported being laughed at/called names, sixteen reported being groped/felt up, fifteen reported being put on display, fourteen reported being physically hurt on purpose and denied access to hormones, and ten reported being denied access to medical treatment. Participants reported that in both general population and ad-seg reported that they were raped and/or sexually assaulted, sold for sex, subjected to humiliating strip searches in front of other inmates, verbally and sexually harassed, had personal property destroyed, received unfair or unprovoked disciplinary charges, and were refused placement in adequate housing. More specifically, all research participants reported being sexually harassed, and sixteen reported having been subjected to a forced sexual situation<sup>4</sup> in prison due to their gender identity. This data reaffirms claims made by trans prison literature about the overwhelmingly high rates of sexual assault that trans feminine prisoners face (Hearts on a Wire 2011; Hagner 2010; Sexton et al. 2011; Spade 2008a, 2008b; Sylvia Rivera Law Project 2007; Tarzwell 2006). Beyond these general findings, participants provided especially detailed responses to questions posed on the intricacies of their gender performance as trans female identified persons in men's correctional facilities. The remainder of this section focuses on this topic, both consolidating the

findings of existing literature and providing finer detail on these experiences of gender expression in U.S. carceral space.

All participants noted that they face extreme gender regulation in prison. Twenty-two participants reported that they are forced to cut their nails; twenty-one noted that they have been prohibited from wearing bras/women's underwear and makeup; and nineteen reported that they have been forced to cut their hair. Research participants also noted that they have been told to 'act normal' or 'like a man', are not allowed to shave, and are not allowed to urinate while sitting down. As one participant stated, 'Simply put, expression is not allowed' (Jessica). Masculine norms are imposed in prison spaces through combinations of disciplinary punishment and social repercussions such as verbal harassment, social isolation, and physical assault. Many participants received disciplinary charges for wearing makeup and femininely altered clothing, and were also denied tools to feminize their presentation, such as razors. As Mystique wrote, '[I've been] harrassed and written disciplinary cases for creating and wearing my own make up and altered commissary bought clothing; and 4 kissing my mate or holding hands/hugging, or sitting on his/her lap'.

The most common restriction of feminine presentation, however, was the prohibition of hormones. Eight participants were able to start or continue taking hormones while in prison, while seven were not, and three were only able to use them intermittently. As Jessica stated, 'I will never be able to truly be myself (unable to start treatment). In many ways, its been the only sense of imprisonment I have felt my whole life ... free to improve myself, become a good human being ... just as long as that human being isn't female'. Access to hormones was one of the most significant concerns for

research participants, as their use was reported to alleviate depression, increase self-confidence, stabilize emotions, and decrease feelings of isolation. For those who had access to hormones, their feminizing effects were an important vehicle to counteract the gender regulations and masculine norms of the prison. For participants who wished to access hormones but were not able to do so, depression and emotional instability were more difficult to alleviate. As one participant, Amanda, wrote, 'I'm depressed most of the time, not being able to express my true self and still being in the wrong body, not being comfortable in my appearance. I have crying fits often for no reason, and I forgo eating so I won't have to be around other people because I'm ashamed of my looks'. Jenna, another participant, also stated that, 'You tend to get depressed because you see your body reversing to what you don't want to be. My breasts have become somewhat hard and my features are not like I would want them to be on hormones. Everything that I have worked for so I can have surgery has gone down the drain'.

Importantly, research participants still found ways to express their femininity despite the numerous barriers they faced. Seven participants continued to dress in a feminine manner by altering men's clothing, applying makeup with art supplies and tattoos, and styling their hair femininely, even if it was cut short. Participants also arched their eyebrows, had feminine mannerisms and speech, found ways to shave, had feminine bodies, painted their nails, and only answered to their preferred names. Despite the fact that these actions could receive disciplinary punishment, these forms of feminine gender expression seemed to be crucial for participants' self-image as trans feminine, as well as their self-confidence and pride. As one participant, Esmia, wrote, 'I feel more feminine, I

have a lot of feminine features, and my breasts are getting big so it makes me real happy I feel totally like a woman.’

As many scholars and activist researchers have noted (Hagner 2010; Hearts on a Wire 2011; Rodriguez 2006; Sexton et al. 2011; Shabazz 2009; Sylvia Rivera Law Project 2007; Tarzwell 2006), gender regulation is a standard element of social control within carceral institutions and is a fundamental aspect of the interactions between prisoners and correctional officers. In particular, harassment and violence in men’s prisons indicate performative elements of carceral masculinity, which establishes hierarchies of failed and successful hegemonic masculine expressions (Shabazz 2009; Tarzwell 2006). Particularly noticeable amongst participant responses is how the majority of harassment and violence was committed by groups of inmates and correctional officers. This group element of masculine performance is critical, as carceral masculinities are constantly being asserted and defended by all persons in men’s prisons (Shabazz 2009). Masculine performances by correctional officers reinforce institutional dominance over prisoners by limiting their means of expression, and masculine performances by prisoners assert resistance against this dominance, simultaneously setting up social hierarchies between inmates. The group harassment of research participants can thus be understood as signaling a collective performance in which the harassing actors reassure themselves of their masculinity and higher-ranking status. By engaging in sexist and homo/transphobic behavior in front of other prisoners and correctional staff, men demonstrate their masculinity to the larger prison population to display self-determination against carceral power, and also gendered hierarchies that place them above others who are less masculine. As Tarzwell (2006, 179) writes, ‘within

this framework [of hypermasculine dominance], femininity and weakness are reciprocally referential: those prisoners displaying 'feminine' traits are more likely to be victimized'. Participants discussed the ways that harassment and violence demean their lives, identities, and bodies by making them feel diseased, different, and hyper-sexualized. One participant, Claireissa, wrote, '...it is very hard sometimes I feel ashamed at times to be who and what I am some times I feel like there is something wrong with me like what they say I must have some kind of disease.' Similarly, Monica stated that, 'I get use to being angry all the time and I train my body in fighting and killing arts of native warriors and plan for the day I'm released. There's no other way for me to deal with the way I feel.'

Of additional interest is the impact of gender regulation on how trans femininity is embodied in carceral space. Trans bodies in prison become complex sites of negotiation, within which circulate emotions, transitions, expressions and (in)securities. On one hand, the experience of being a trans body in prison is disembodying; trans bodies are left in states of limbo where transitions are forgotten and the consequences of such severe neglect are most often ignored. Trans feminine embodiments become ghostly, surfacing like apparitions attempting to be realized, acknowledged and placed. But the (dis)embodying effects of carceral masculine space are paradoxical, as trans feminine individuals, on the other hand, also experience hyper-attention to their bodies. Because the violence they experience is often attributed to their transness, their bodies are re-inscribed into the prison space as something that cannot be unnoticed or unseen. Attempts to quell trans feminine embodiment pull invisibilized bodies back into the prison walls, where they undergo the pull and push between seen and unseen.

As noted above, expressions of femininity are still able to emerge despite these constant mechanisms of hypermasculine force against trans feminine prisoners, pushing the boundaries of hegemonic masculine space and challenging its preservation. By continuing to express femininity, regardless of strong institutional regulations and punishment that prohibit and/or discourage it, research participants assert themselves against enforced institutional masculinity. They attempt to mitigate carceral dominance over their bodily sovereignty by exhibiting agency over their gender identities, expression, and embodiment in spite of the institutional punishment they face for these actions, often as time in ad-seg. On this point, feminist prison studies scholars Bosworth and Carrabine (2001) offer an important caution. They note that in the face of ‘undeniable power inequalities in prisons, prisoners actively create their own space’ (Bosworth and Carrabine 2001, 513) since prisons do not erase human agency. Yet, especially in such a constrained and highly regulated environment, it would be a mistake to read too much into evidence of resistance to heterosexual and hypermasculine norms in prisons. In short, as they state, ‘resistance should not be simply equated with rudimentary forms of political action and transformation’ (Bosworth and Carrabine 2001, 506). So it would be erroneous to credit instances of trans feminine agency and gender expression as wholly subverting the hypermasculine power of carceral space.

This is not to dismiss instances of pushback against carceral and hypermasculine authority by trans feminine incarcerated persons as insignificant however. These feminine performances may indeed ‘open up the scope for slippage’ of power in carceral hegemonic masculine space, and offer an example of ‘the way in which the hierarchies embedded in physical location, in absolute space, can be challenged’ (Gregson and Rose

2000, 446) in certain circumstances. But the aim of the study upon which this article is based did not query whether or how participants politicized their resistance. It rather focused on participants' individual experiences of carceral space. In this regard, participants provided ample evidence that they exert agency to sustain themselves in the face of rather bleak circumstances. At the very least, respondents maintain hope in various ways. Though no questions on the maintenance of hope were asked in the questionnaire, participants' responses contain many striking references to the idea of a hopeful future. For example, as Tammy Faye wrote, 'I never taken hormones before coming to prison, but I do look forward to taking hormones once I am release onto parole ... mentally the relief of being my true self out into the open is so up lifting.'

The desire to actualize a more feminized physical form was expressed by many of the research participants in the study, and it is in relation to discussion of this desire that participants' narratives touched on the notion of hope. Particularly important in sustaining hope amongst participants is the role that the imagination plays in being able to sustain their trans feminine identities. Jessica submitted numerous drawings with her questionnaire which depict her idealized post-transition body. In her description of the drawings, she explained that, '[my art] comes from the repression of an ability to express myself as a transperson (I can't express it in life, so I express it in art)'. Using her imagination to assert her trans feminine identity is Jessica's way of defying carceral institutional and social attempts to subdue her self-understanding and expression. As she describes her self-portrait, 'This woman is my inner-Jessica, beautiful, comfortable in knowing she is sexy, not affraid to show it. It's what I'd like to think I will look like when I finally get the chance to undertake my process'. For Jessica, her imagination



fosters a hope in the future by securing the possibility to transition, undermining the totalizing mind-power exerted by prisons.

Clearly, then, the power of the imagination is crucial when positioned against institutions that wield social death through complete control over a person's identity, emotionality, and embodiment. As Appadurai (2000, 6) states:

The imagination is no longer a matter of individual genius, escapism from ordinary life, or just a dimension of aesthetics. It is a faculty that informs the daily lives of ordinary people in myriad ways: It allows people to consider migration, resist state violence, seek social redress... [and] it is also the faculty through which collective patterns of dissent and new designs for collective life emerge.

For trans feminine individuals who face attempted carceral breakdowns of their bodies and identities, the imagination can provide a means of resistance by accessing, or obtaining proximity to, happiness. Obtaining this closeness to what Sara Ahmed (2010a) calls a 'happy object' can be incredibly powerful for those who are marginalized or oppressed. Ahmed explains that,

We could say that happiness is promised through proximity to certain objects. Objects would not refer only to physical or material things, but also to anything that we imagine might lead us to happiness, including objects in the sense of values, practice, and styles, as well as aspirations. Doing x as well as having x might be what promises us happiness. (2010a, 41)

Ahmed (2010b, 202, original emphasis) continues that, 'happiness might also *contain* the forms in which desire can be realized'; consequently, a happy object can contain a desired physical form that can be realized mentally and thus become proximate to the subject. For trans feminine prisoners, a happy object may be the imagining of a future

feminized body. The potential in being able to imagine and explore a gender-affirming physical form can provide the space for emotional reprieve, in which the desire to live in a body that more accurately reflects one's understood self can emerge. If these moments of reprieve, these happy objects, are accessible, a prisoner's future can become tangible, instilling that they can survive incarceration and achieve a desired form of embodiment. This is a space where the hope of embodiment can manifest, and is a critical component of survival and self-care. Consequently, while Jessica may not be allowed access to hormones and express herself on the inside, she is able to access and explore a vision of what her body *will* look like in the future. This *will* is significant, as it signifies that there is no doubt for Jessica. She is assured that this achievement will one day be possible.

A proximity to happiness also emerged in fostering relationships with other transgender and queer people. By impressing a sense of community, research participants found ways to escape the isolation, despondency, and harsh transphobia of prison. One participant, Mystique, wrote, 'I've been further inspired/encouraged to 'be proud' and feel better about myself. I've been given a sense of value and purpose... and has helped me tremendously and made me feel less lonely, and forgotten; and more useful and needed'. Tsunami indicated similar feelings, stating that, 'My GLBTQ friends are the only reason I'm still alive ... Nothing can defeat support and solidarity in the long run.' This calls our attention to the importance of solidarity and community support, and the ways in which networks of trans and queer people can foster healing and aid in the survival of carceral injury. Having relationships with other trans or queer people, whether other inmates or outside pen pals, is critical for a movement that seeks to resist the totalizing nature of fear, seclusion, and 'social irreconcilability' (Rodriguez 2006, 426)

that prisons elicit. Nurturing networks of care, support, and understanding can help transgender prisoners maintain a level of bodily sovereignty, as well as a proximity to happiness and hope by countering carceral social death with feelings of love, appreciation, and value. Consequently, obtaining a proximity to happiness and hope can help defy the logic of applied biopower, social death and hypermasculine carceral domination over trans feminine prisoners.

## **Conclusion**

Trans lives have unfortunately been largely ignored within the by now very large queer geography and sexuality and space literatures. As part of efforts to address this omission, this article extends geographical understandings of trans lives to a new population in a new space, and one that is in urgent need of scholarly and activist attention. As demonstrated in the small body of work on trans prisoners in the U.S. that has emerged recently outside the discipline of geography, trans persons are incarcerated at a disproportionately high rate and face harsh conditions while imprisoned. This is however a difficult group of people to gain access to as researchers. Of course, conducting research with any prison population is difficult since confinement in government facilities complicates attainment of participant consent and raises issues of confidentiality due to the pervasiveness of surveillance techniques. But additional practical and ethical issues arise when attempting to access sexual and gender minorities such as trans prisoners who are in especially vulnerable positions. Thus, despite growing scholarly and activist attention to the urgent plight of trans incarcerated persons in the U.S., there are still very few available first-hand accounts of their experiences. The responses of our twenty-three participants confined in several U.S. states thus extend existing knowledge.

Our research participants endure harsh conditions of confinement, and therefore their stories corroborate the findings of the existing literature within trans studies. Further, some of their responses offer insight into ways in which trans incarcerated persons cope in the hypermasculine and heteronormative space of the U.S. prison.

While the particular form of lost bodily sovereignty that our research participants attest to experiencing is important to understand in its own right, the figure of the trans prisoner also important implications for further scholarship and activism, and we wish to point to these in closing. First, feminist critiques of carceral spaces have established the point that prisons are highly gendered institutions in that penal discipline aims to foster properly feminine and masculine subjects (for such critiques by geographers, see Dirsuweit 1999; Moran et al. 2009; Shabazz 2009). But our understanding of the ways in which normative regimes of gender and sexuality work in carceral spaces is incomplete when derived solely from accounts of the experiences of cisgendered and gender conforming subjects. Second, while feminist and other critical prison scholarship has overlooked trans issues, queer and trans scholarship beyond the small body of work referenced here has likewise not yet adequately grappled with the extent and nature of trans incarceration. Centering the prison within queer/trans scholarship not only brings a heretofore marginalized group of subjects into view, it has potential to deepen and extend the critiques of the politics of homonormativity that geographers have been vocal in advancing alongside other queer studies scholars (in geography, see: Bell and Binnie 2004; Nast 2002; Rushbrook 2002).

In her careful historical study of sexuality and the modern U.S. prison system, Regina Kunzel (2010) details that imprisoned queer people – including imprisoned trans

people – were a central focus of radical LGBT activism through the 1970s. But this politics of solidarity gave way beginning in the 1980s as part of the shift towards a liberal politics of inclusion, rights and gay marriage. As Stephen Dillon (2011, 181) eloquently notes, ‘the purging of imprisoned queer and trans people from ‘the community’ has, in part, acted as the condition of possibility for the privileges and power afforded to those not ensnared in the nexus of power produced by neoliberalism, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy and regimes of incarceration ‘. So we join with trans studies scholars (particularly Spade 2011, and Stanley and Smith 2011) as well as activist groups such as the Sylvia Rivera Project, Hearts on a Wire, and Transforming Justice in calling not only for attention to be paid to the immediate human rights crises that trans prisoners in the U.S. face, but also for the pursuit of trans decarceration (to be achieved for instance through efforts to address trans poverty and homelessness, to provide safe drug treatment options and to eliminate transphobic bias within the legal system) as part of the advancement of a queer abolitionist politics.

## **Acknowledgement**

### **Notes**

1. It should be noted that there is a higher representation of MTF individuals in U.S. prisons as opposed to those who are FTM. This overrepresentation reflects the reality that there are higher levels of incarcerated cis men than cis women in the U.S. and many argue that it is also due to the increased visibility of, and consequently discrimination against, trans feminine people (Hearts on a Wire 2011; Jenness 2010; Sexton et al. 2011; Sylvia Rivera Law Project, 2007). The experiences of FTM prisoners are sorely understudied, but see Girshick (2011).
2. Transgender and transsexual were both used interchangeably to refer to being a male-to-female trans person, while genderqueer alluded to gender fluidity as well as those who were not male-to-female trans persons.

3. The Sylvia Rivera Law Project notes that while not all trans and intersex people undergo medical treatment, including hormone therapy, but ‘those who do consider their treatment both medically necessary and a central aspect to their general well-being’ (2007, 27). Despite this, even in those states that do allow hormone therapy during imprisonment, the inmate must show proof of diagnosis with Gender Identity Disorder by a recognized medical professional and must have been following a prescribed course of treatment prior to imprisonment.

4. The term ‘forced sexual situation’ was used instead of rape or sexual assault. This followed activist organization Hearts on a Wire’s use of ‘forced sexual situation’ to be more inclusive of all forms of sexual violence.

### **Notes on contributors**

Rae Rosenberg holds an MA in Geography from McGill University. His research and activist efforts centre around transgender issues in the United States.

Natalie Oswin is Assistant Professor of Geography at McGill University. Her published work includes explorations of sexual citizenship in Singapore and the gay and lesbian movement in post-apartheid South Africa, as well as conceptual pieces on queer geographies.

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